



How to Trace Your Immigrant Ancestors

Finding Family: In the 21st century, it's tempting to think that all you have to do is type your last name into a computer and all the records of your immigrant ancestors will instantly appear. That's only partially true: such a search may yield hundreds or thousands of possible matches, but you have no way of knowing which of them, if any, are your relatives — and you may not be looking in the right database.

Before you search the records, begin by gathering as much information as possible from *sources within your family*. Try to identify the names of particular immigrants, the date of their arrival in the United States, their port of departure overseas, and their age at immigration. Ask your relatives what they know and see if they have any old documents that might provide information, such as birth, marriage, or death certificates; steamship tickets; naturalization papers; a family Bible; or photos that can help identify people and narrow down dates. You may even discover that you have a relative who's already done a lot of genealogical research, so that you don't have to start from scratch.

Ship Manifests: Throughout most of U.S. history, the official record of a person's immigration is found in the *manifest*, or passenger list, of the ship in which he or she arrived. The United States began requiring ships to provide copies of their manifests to the federal government in 1820. Many earlier passenger lists still exist, but the records before 1820 are not complete. Early manifests provide little information about each passenger.

Most 19th century manifests provide the name of the vessel, the ports of departure and arrival, and the date of arrival in the United States. For each passenger, the list provides the person's name, age, sex, occupation, country of origin, and country of intended settlement. You may also learn if the person was traveling alone or with family, and sometimes the number of bags carried. Births and deaths that occurred during the voyage are also noted.

Beginning in 1893, the lists provide more detailed information for each passenger. The manifest also records the person's marital status, nationality, last residence, and final destination. Passengers were asked whether they had been in the United States before, and if so, when and where. If the passenger was going to join a relative in the U.S.A., that person's name, address, and relationship to the passenger is recorded. If a passenger was detained upon entering the country, the manifest should include notes related to the detention, usually at both the passenger's main listing and on a separate page listing all detainees.

The content of passenger lists expanded over the years in response to U.S. legal requirements. A person's race began to be listed, for example, in 1903; a physical description and birthplace in 1906; and the name and address of the nearest relative back home in 1907. By 1924, at the end of Ellis Island's peak years, manifests include at least 31 pieces of information about each passenger.

Where you should look for a particular immigrant's manifest depends on the year and port of entry. The remainder of this brochure will provide guidance on where and how to search.

Ellis Island Records, 1892–1924: For the peak years of immigration through Ellis Island and the Port of New York, the **American Family Immigration History Center** (AFIHC) provides searchable access to digital images of all ship manifests. Visitors to Ellis Island may do their research at AFIHC's computers, and the same information can be accessed online at **www.EllisIsland.org**.

Note that the AFIHC records include every human being on every ship entering the Port of New York from 1892 through 1924 — including persons who may not actually have set foot on Ellis Island, such as 1st and 2nd class passengers who were inspected on board ship, U.S. citizens, and each vessel's crew members. The Port of New York includes not only docks in New York City, but also in nearby New Jersey.

At this writing, Ellis Island's on-site facilities are limited as the museum recovers from flooding by Hurricane Sandy. Some of AFIHC's normal services remain unavailable at this time, such as printouts of the manifests and ship pictures viewed on AFIHC's computers. You can order copies of such documents at AFIHC and online. There is no charge to search Ellis Island's records online, but you are requested to register and there is a fee for all printouts. The AFIHC website provides suggestions on how to conduct genealogical research, as well as information about immigration history and Ellis Island history. Those who visit AFIHC in person can ask questions of its trained staff and of the Park Rangers at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.

Please note that Ellis Island's **American Immigrant Wall of Honor** is *not* a list of all the immigrants who came through the island. The wall is a way to honor *any* immigrant in U.S. history by making a donation to the Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Foundation to have their name inscribed. For further information on the wall and a list of those honored, visit **www.WallofHonor.org**.

Ellis Island Records, 1925–1954: Ship manifests for the Port of New York from 1925 through 1954 have recently been digitized through a partnership between the **National Archives and Records Administration** (NARA) and the subscription-based genealogy website Ancestry.com. These records are not yet available at Ellis Island or on **www.EllisIsland.org** because of delays in upgrading our system caused by Hurricane Sandy. Researchers can access these manifests free of charge at branches of the National Archives and at many public libraries, or by subscription from **www.Ancestry.com**.

Note that most immigrants entering the Port of New York after 1924 did *not* pass through Ellis Island. The normal procedure during this period would have been to obtain a visa at a U.S. consulate in the immigrant's home country and then go through U.S. Customs upon arrival in America at the ship's pier, airline terminal, or border crossing. A few immigrants who needed to be detained did set foot on Ellis Island between 1925 and 1954, when the immigration station closed.

New York Immigration Records Before and After Ellis Island: Castle Garden in lower Manhattan was the Port of New York's immigration station from 1855 to 1890. It was run by the State of New York, before the federal government took over immigrant inspections and opened Ellis Island. The free website **www.CastleGarden.org** contains an index to New York arrival records from 1820 through 1891. Digital images of the manifests themselves can be accessed free of charge at branches of the National Archives and at many public libraries, or by subscription from **www.Ancestry.com**.

The National Archives and Ancestry.com can also provide you with New York arrival records after Ellis Island, up to and including the year 1957. Immigration records after 1957 are considered currently active (rather than historic) and are therefore protected by the Privacy Act, so they are not accessible by the general public. However, if you are the immigrant yourself or the relative of a deceased immigrant, the Freedom of Information Act enables you to request a copy of a more recent record from ***U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services***, the federal agency that handles immigration today. Procedures for making such a request can be found at **www.uscis.gov/about-us/freedom-information-and-privacy-act-foia/how-file-foia-privacy-act-request/how-file-foiapa-request**.

Records from Other Ports of Entry: Immigrants could enter the United States through dozens of ports and border crossings. If you are uncertain where your ancestor arrived, begin with the Port of New York, because that has been the largest port of entry throughout most of U.S. history.

Among the other ports of entry, immigration records have been digitized to date from Baltimore, Boston, Detroit, Galveston, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle, and certain other ports in California, Florida, Oregon, Texas, and Washington State. Online transcripts of the manifests (rather than images) are available for New Orleans. The exact years covered by the different ports' databases vary. Whatever records have been digitized can be accessed free of charge at branches of the National Archives and at many public libraries, or by subscription from **www.Ancestry.com**.

For most other ports, online indexes exist but the full manifests are only available at this time on microfilm. The National Archives headquarters in Washington, D.C. has microfilm arrival records for the entire country. Regional branches of the archives have microfilm for ports in their area. For a complete list of these locations, go to **www.archives.gov** and click the link called "Our Locations." We recommend calling or emailing a NARA regional office before visiting, to ensure they have the records you seek.

If Your Ancestor Was Enslaved: Enslaved persons are not normally listed by name on the cargo manifest of the ship that brought them to America. You can try to learn the names of particular enslaved ancestors by starting with family sources and then working back through public records such as census results, Freedmen's Bureau records, fugitive slave cases, wills, tax and insurance records, and manifests from domestic voyages that do list enslaved persons by name.

If you can pinpoint where, when, and by whom an ancestor was first purchased, this provides circumstantial evidence that may help you identify the ship that most likely transported your relative. More than 35,000 voyages that brought over 12 million Africans to America are documented in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database at www.slavevoyages.org. Additional resources for African American genealogy are provided by the National Archives at www.archives.gov/research/african-americans.

Other Sources of Immigration-Related Records: In addition to ship manifests, there are other types of records that can shed light on an immigrant's arrival in America, including naturalization records, visa applications, and census records. There are compiled indexes of passenger records and steamship voyages that can supplement today's searchable databases. Certain specialized immigration indexes and databases have been compiled for particular ethnic groups, ports of entry, and ports of departure.

Be persistent if you don't immediately find your ancestor's record. Spelling of names can be a major issue, since the shipping company may have written a name differently on the manifest from the spelling you know. (It's a myth that names were changed at Ellis Island, since the inspectors there worked from manifests the *shipping companies* created!) Poorly legible handwriting on a manifest can mean a change in spelling when a modern reader had to enter the name into a database. So try different spellings, and try different websites whose indexes may have keyed the name in differently. If you know the name of an immigrant's ship, then search by ship and review line-by-line all its manifests near the person's estimated arrival date. Some genealogy websites make available the results of other people's research, such as family trees, where you can check to see if someone else has already found the information you seek and made it available online.

Here are some additional resources that may help you in researching your family's immigration history:

- **National Archives and Records Administration (NARA):** The National Archives is the official repository for all historic U.S. Government records. If you are visiting Ellis Island, the New York branch of NARA is close by at *One Bowling Green (3rd Floor)* in lower Manhattan. You can contact them at www.archives.gov/nyc or by calling (866) 840-1752. The main National Archives website at www.archives.gov/research/immigration contains numerous links and suggestions that can assist you. It also lists other NARA offices that you can visit throughout the United States.
- **U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services:** This is the U.S. Government agency that handles immigration today. Their historic holdings include *naturalization records* of

- immigrants who applied to become citizens (1906–1956), *visa files* of those applying for permanent residence (1924–1944), and consolidated immigrant case *files* known as A-Files and C-Files (1906–1956). For information on accessing these and other records, visit **www.uscis.gov/historyandgenealogy**.
- **Steamship Directories:** Two useful documents are the *Registers of Vessels Arriving at the Port of New York from Foreign Ports, 1789-1919* and the *Morton Allen Directory of European Passenger Steamship Arrivals*, which includes dates up to 1930. Since these publications list the names and arrival dates of all passenger ships entering the Port of New York from abroad, they can help you identify which manifests to search. At this time, these publications are only available in hard copy and on microfilm at branches of the National Archives and at selected public libraries.
- **www.Ancestry.com:** In addition to partnering with the National Archives to make online immigration records available to the public, this website contains extensive holdings of other genealogical records, including naturalization, census, birth, marriage, and death records. Although Ancestry.com is a paid subscription service, it can be accessed free of charge at branches of NARA and at many public libraries.
- **www.FamilySearch.org:** This is a free genealogy website provided by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, also known as the Mormons. Theirs is the largest collection of genealogical and historical records in the world. It includes virtually all U.S. immigration records that have been digitized to date, as well as naturalization, census, birth, marriage, and death records.
- **www.CyndisList.com:** Cyndi's List is an index that provides links to online genealogy resources of all kinds, including those related to immigration.
- **<http://SteveMorse.org>:** This website is a clearinghouse of online resource links and research tips for locating immigration records and related genealogical information.
- **www.Gjenvick.com:** The Gjenvick-Gjønvik Archives is an extensive collection of documents and images relating to steamship and ocean liner history.
- **www.GermanRoots.com:** This website offers links to online resources and tips for doing German genealogical research, with many of the suggestions also relevant to other ethnic groups.
- **www.TheGGG.org** and **www.ItalianGen.org:** These sites provide online indexes to records for the New York City area that cover all ethnic groups, including an index to naturalization records. For their members, the German Genealogy Group and the Italian Genealogical Group provide additional resources and forums for those researching German and Italian family history respectively.
- **www.JewishGen.org:** Affiliated with the Museum of Jewish Heritage, this website contains extensive databases, research tools, and other resources to help those seeking Jewish ancestors. A comprehensive guide to manifest notations can be found at **www.jewishgen.org/infofiles/manifests**.

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